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A Biographical Sketch of General Joseph Martin.

BY HIS SON.

[Though Mr. Stephen B. Weeks has published a very thorough study of the life of the distinguished pioneer, General Joseph Martin, and has made use of the narrative given here, yet it seems not inadvisable to publish the story of General Martin's life, by his son, in its original form. It was a cause of some surprise to find that Mr. Weeks' book was not more generally known among the people who should feel an especial interest in General Martin's career, and it is hoped that the publication of this biographical sketch will not only interest the readers of the *Magazine*, but attract additional attention to Mr. Weeks' admirable work.

We are indebted to Colonel C. B. Bryant, Martinsville, Va., for a copy of the sketch.]

GENERAL JOSEPH MARTIN, of Henry county, Va., born 1740, in Albemarle county, Va., died 1808, in Henry county, Va., and buried at "Belmont," his estate on Leatherwood, of 1210 acres, purchased in 1796 of Benjamin Harrison, Jr., of Berkley.

Among his descendants who are dead, are remembered Brice Martin, a Presbyterian minister, John R. Martin, a Primitive Baptist preacher, Joseph B. and Lafayette Martin, of the North Carolina Methodist Episcopal Conference, Colonel William Martin, a distinguished lawyer of the Henry county bar. Among the living are: Judges Samuel W. and Martin N. Williams, of southwest Virginia, and Judge Nicholas H. Hairston, of Martinsville, Va., besides a score or more, dead or living, who are or were prominently connected with the history of this and several other States, and of some of whom mention may perhaps be made in a future contribution.

DIXON'S SPRINGS, TENNESSEE,

1st June, 1842.

Lyman C. Draper, Esq.,

Dear Sir,—On my return lately from a long journey to the south, I found a letter from my brother, John C. Martin, of

Cannon county, this State, enclosing one from you to him, of the 20th of March, informing him that you were engaged in collecting material for the purpose of publishing "Biographical Sketches of Distinguished Pioneers of the West," and having understood that his father, General Joseph Martin, was one of that description, requested him to furnish you with the particulars of his life. That is to say: When and where he was born; his ancestry, early education, and employment. When he settled on the Long Island of Holston River, and under what circumstances; his civil and military life; the leading traits of character, and when and where he died, and whatever else might be interesting; and my brother, knowing me to be much older than himself, presuming that I could give the information desired much more fully than he could, has imposed the duty on me. This I am about to undertake; though I have nothing but memory to assist me, this, however, is what may be called retentive.

I will here remark, however, that I am now in my seventy-seventh year, am my father's oldest child but one, so that I was in active life many years before his death—was with him a good deal in his western enterprises. He was particularly communicative to me, and gave me a history of his early life and that of his ancestry as far as he knew.

I now regret, and have long regretted, that neither he nor myself did not write this out at the time. But the education of both was limited, and our employment such as inclined the mind to almost anything rather than writing—meaning the frontier wars, &c., for I, myself, was long in those wars.

Know then that my father was born in the year 1740, in Albemarle county, Virginia, near Charlottesville. His father was an Englishman, born and raised in the city of Bristol, named Joseph Martin, the youngest of three children (two sons and one daughter) of a wealthy merchant of that city, engaged in the American trade. He fitted off his said son Joseph when young as supercargo to Virginia, in a vessel called the *Brice*. He, my grand-father, afterwards named one of his sons Brice in memory of this ship; and the name has been perpetuated in the family from then until now, and it has spread considerably among our friends. There in Virginia he married Susannah Chiles, daugh-

ter of ——— Chiles, a respectable and wealthy farmer of that State. With this his father's English pride became so offended (as they, the English, considered the Colonists an inferior degraded set) that he determined to disinherit him; which he finally did. My grandfather never returned to England, but settled in Albemarle county, where he raised eleven children—five sons and six daughters, all of unusually large stature—in other respects about mediocrity; except my father and two sisters who were superiors. They were all respectable and occupied about the middle rank in society, as did their father. He, my grandfather, was a perfect Englishman—large and athletic; bold, daring, self-willed and supercilious, with the highest sense of honor. And in him was depicted, as my father has told me, the most complete form of the aristocracy of the British government. He lived to a good old age and died about 1760, leaving a pretty good estate. My grandmother was one of the best of woman kind—her parents of English descent. They raised a large family of children, mostly daughters, all highly respectable, and from whom has descended an immense offspring, as the Wallers, Carrs, Lewises, Marks, Overtons, Minors, Terrys, Chiles, &c., now spread mostly through the South and West.

My father was the third son of the family, large of stature, six feet high weighing two hundred pounds and one of the finest figures of a man I ever saw, with prepossessing, commanding appearance. No man could approach him with indifference, though easy of access, manners bland and courteous, an intellect of the highest order and a spirit which knew not fear. And in him was combined what rarely happens in any one individual, viz: physical and mental powers of superior order, and a spirit of the most energetic, romantic, intrepid, daring enterprise, which fitted him well for the theatre on which circumstances called him to act, viz: the western frontier of the English settlements, then bounded by a cordon of powerful tribes of hostile ferocious Indians.

This was well suited to his peculiar genius; nor did it fail to develope his whole powers. It was singular that, notwithstanding his great commanding powers, he could neither write nor speak. And although many years of his after life associated him with men of fashion and refinement, and although he was

fond of fine clothes and dressed neatly, yet he never changed the fashion of his dress, but tenaciously adhered to the small clothes, pants short and knee buckles, wide-backed, straight-breasted coat, skirted vest and neck stock with the buckle. I have often thought it strange that notwithstanding the many scenes he had gone through, and his association with all descriptions of men, during a long and active life, that he still clung with such indomitable pertinacity to the love of times past with their associations. Indeed he had in his composition a good deal of the old English aristocracy which would occasionally leak out and prided himself much on being *a Saxon*.

With his equals and inferiors he was easy, sociable, jocular, convivial even to volubility. With superiors, grave, dignified, commanding. He was temperate in his habits; ate less than almost any man, drank no ardent spirits at any time beyond a social glass, so called, and for many years of his after life, none at all. Was never intoxicated in his life; not profane; had the finest flow of health and spirits, no pains, rarely ever sick, never had his skin cut with a lancet, and died without the loss or defection of a single tooth. When a boy, he was large, rude and ungovernable; could not be kept at school; would often run off and spend his time in the neighborhood with idle boys, so that he got but little education. And such was his reckless disposition that his father, with all his energy of character, could not govern him. He finally bound him out to learn the carpenter's trade. This however was too limited a sphere for his ardent temperament, and he ran off from his "Master," and went and joined the army at Ft. Pitt, now Pittsburg. This was during the war '56, and here I will digress a little from the thread of the narrative, in order to bring in an anecdote, showing in a small way something of the features of the times; for it is by smalls that you get a whole. My father in his raising among other boys of the same temperament, became associated with Tom ———, General Sumpter, who so distinguished himself as the partizan chief in South Carolina during the war of the Revolution, and went with him to the war. Behold these two hapless youths, those turbulent spirits that could not be tamed with the ordinary pursuits of civil life, rushing along like water seeking its own level, four or five hundred miles through mostly a wilder-

ness interspersed with hostile savages in quest of aliment that might satisfy their craving appetites. Little did they, or any body else think at the time, that these were some of the rising spirits that were to lead in the revolution which afterwards gave liberty to this country: How long they remained in the army or the part they acted there, is not known, though it is thought a good while. Sumpter returned first. My father, on his return, found him in jail at Staunton, Virginia, for debt. He obtained permission to lodge a night in prison with his friend. In the morning when he went out he left with Sumpter his tomahawk and ten guineas, and with one or both of which he escaped from prison. Soon afterwards he went to South Carolina, changed his course of life and became distinguished, as is known to all who have read the history of the Revolution. Thus were they separated for many years; and until at length my father was at Richmond, Virginia, a member of the legislature; Sumpter was a member of Congress, and on his way home called at Richmond where they met for the first time in more than thirty years. What a meeting this must have been! to talk over old matters and things! They had both now become old and highly elevated in the temple of Fame. What proud satisfaction they must have felt in the retrospection! Before they separated Sumpter handed my father twenty guineas—having reference to the prison.

My father now returned home, or rather to the country where he had been raised, matured in manhood and in the vices common to the times, with the exception of drinking, and a great proficient in the science of gambling. His father was now dead, having left him a small patrimony. This he soon wasted in riotous living, and in addition became much involved in debt, as did several others of his associates engaged in this crusade of ruin. They finally concluded to break up, separate, and reform, of which there was little hope while they kept together. This they did, most of them going to the south, where they did well. One of the number was Col. Benjamin Cleveland, one of the "Heroes of King's Mountain."

My father about this time married, poor and embarrassed as he was. He was now twenty-two years old. My mother was of the first order for her station in life, she was also poor.

He now seemed to feel the responsibility of his station—a

family to provide for—betook himself to industry, tried to work, but made a poor hand at it; his restless spirit could not be patient at the plow.

About this time, the relations in England who had inherited the immense family estate, to the exclusion of my grandfather, wrote over that if some of the family would come there, they would divide the inheritance. My father was appointed to go; arrangements were made, and a passage engaged on a certain vessel. But something prevented his getting to the wharf in time, and she sailed without him. The vessel was finally lost at sea, and all on board perished. He nevertheless had to plod at this kind of *servility*, as it was, to his aspiring genius. He still engaged in his favorite practice of gambling—more for the sake of gain than anything else—and by it realized much—turning all to advantage and having now become provident. In gambling, in addition to being master of the art, he always kept sober (though often feigning drunkenness), and his superior physical powers and resolution (for in fighting he was the terror of the country), gave him a decided advantage over others. At this time peltry was in great demand. Many were in pursuit of the article, and my father determined to engage in it—the Indian war being over. He accordingly joined with others and went far beyond the frontier, then a hundred miles in advance of where he lived. The custom was to spend six or eight months on a trip, and return loaded with deer skins and furs, which brought a fine price. He followed this for several years, with the profits of which and what he made by gambling when at home, he became able to disenthral himself of the debts which had so long weighed him down. He now considered and felt himself a free-man. It may be remarked that although he had long indulged in some of the grosser vices, he was considered honorable, and had the friendship of many of the best men in the country; and notwithstanding he was called the great bully of the county, he was by no means quarrelsome, but on the contrary, good natured and conciliatory. He continued his long hunting trips for several years, and improved his circumstances. In his wilderness-roamings he discovered Powell's Valley—a body of extremely fertile land, with which he became much enamored. And whether he foresaw that the time was not far distant when

the mighty emigration, then pouring to the west, would reach that point, although a hundred miles beyond the settlements, and that a location would in after time give preference, or whether he contemplated making a permanent stand there, is not known. Be it however as it may, he determined to make the venture. By this time he had become distinguished as a daring, enterprising back-woodsman; and then, as ever, he had a commanding influence over those with whom he associated. He soon, by the allurements he held out, engaged a number of men—say twenty or thirty—to go with him. They accordingly went and made their stand in the valley, at a place afterwards known by the name of “Martin’s Station,” on the great thoroughfare leading to Kentucky. Here they cleared land and planted corn and other vegetables. In the latter part of the summer the Indians broke them up, and they abandoned the enterprise and went home. This was about the year 1768 or 1769.

This valley consists of a long reach of unusually fertile land, adjoining the Cumberland mountain on the east side, embracing Cumberland Gap, notorious in Western history. The principal part of the valley is now in Lee county, Virginia. I have said above that my father discovered this valley in his western rambles. It may not be improper to explain a little more on that subject: not with a view to biographical notice, but as you are in pursuit of the Legends of the West, it may not be uninteresting to know the history of the case I am about to relate—known to very few now living, even by tradition, viz:

About the close of the French war, or perhaps a little later, a treaty was made with the Cherokees at Fort Chisel, New River—now Montgomery county, Virginia—then a frontier. Colonel Byrd was English Commissioner, and the “Standing Turkey” principal Indian Chief. In this treaty it was provided for some of the Chiefs to visit England; Dr. Walker, a gentleman of some distinction, living in Albemarle, and neighbor to my father was appointed to go with them. This he did. On his return he accompanied them home. On their way, the Indians being the guides, they passed through this same Powell’s Valley. At the place now called Cumberland Gap they discovered a fine spring; and still having some rum left, they drank the health of the Duke

of Cumberland with whom Walker had become acquainted in England while there. This gave rise to the name of Cumberland Gap—Cumberland mountain and Cumberland river which rises in Cumberland mountain. It may be remarked that the Cumberland mountain is impassable for a horse for more than twenty miles immediately before reaching the gap referred to. That circumstance has given rise to its great notoriety. Walker, on his return, told my father of this valley and represented it in such terms as induced him to go as above stated.

He now quit his western rambles and concluded to try the soil; but, having no land of his own, he engaged as overseer for a rich relation by the name of Minor, and here he lived for three years. By this time he had by great industry improved his circumstances so as to purchase a good tract of land, which he did, in Pittsylvania county, adjoining North Carolina, to which he removed in the year 1773. This county was divided in a few years after, and the new county within which it fell was named Henry, and it was the first new county laid out in the State after they had struck for Independence. The next year, 1774, the great Shawnee War, so called, broke out, with an immense frontier exposed, and he engaged in the war and was long from home. About this time, 1774, Henderson and others, a company associated for the purpose, purchased of the Cherokees the whole, or nearly the whole of the western part of Virginia and North Carolina (not before relinquished), as those States then claimed, a great part of which is now embraced by Kentucky and Tennessee.

A history of this transaction, which gave rise to such mighty results as have followed from it, may be seen in "Haywood's History of Tennessee." This book, although quite imperfect in some respects, and in others light and trifling, nevertheless contains a good deal of matter essential for the book you are engaged on. The particulars I allude to mostly, are Henderson's Purchase, so called, and that of the State of Franklin. I refer to these upon the presumption that you are little acquainted with Tennessee, and may not have heard much of the cases I refer to; or if you have, it may not have been from the best sources. (You will know how to excuse my frequent digressions from the story I have undertaken to write out—I know it is presuming

pretty freely on the patience of a stranger—my motive is to assist you as far as I can, and if I fail in this, accept the will for the deed.) Above I have spoken of Henderson's purchase. My father was appointed Entry-Taker and agent for the Powell Valley portion. He and others went on in the early part of the year 1775 (at the same time Kentucky was settled), and made their stand at the very spot where he had made corn several years before. This was fifty miles in advance of the then frontier; and on the road or path to Kentucky. Here they made corn that year.

The next year the great Cherokee war, as it was called at the time, broke out, and it may be remembered that the Cherokee was then a great and powerful people; their strength unbroken and living not far from Powell's Valley; and being incited by British agents sent among them commenced a sudden devastating war on the whole frontier border, with the ferocity common to barbarians. Powell's Valley felt her full share of this mighty onset, and the whole settlement was broken up. This happened in June of that year, 1776. My father now returned to his home in Virginia, raised and commanded a company of men, and joined a campaign planned against the Cherokees commanded by Col. Christian. This campaign of two thousand men marched against the Cherokees in the autumn of that year; laid waste a great part of their settlements, and returned, having met with but little opposition. On the return of the army it was disbanded, with the exception of a few companies posted on the frontier; one of which my father commanded. In the spring of the next year, 1777, the Indians sued for peace. In June following, a treaty was held at the Long Island of Holston, which was the extreme frontier, and one hundred and twenty miles from the nearest Indian settlements. By this treaty the Indians relinquished title to a large boundary of country embracing the Long Island. This Island, however, was reserved as neutral or common ground, to be claimed specifically by neither party, but considered *peace* or *beloved* ground; that, whether in war or peace, the parties might meet here without fear of molestation, and under no circumstances was blood to be shed here. It was stipulated also that the British agent should be expelled from the Indian country,

and one appointed by the United States to superintend, &c., and that he should reside on the Island of Peace ground. This Island is now in Sullivan county, Tennessee (named for General Sullivan of the Revolution), is four to five miles long, of variable width, in no part exceeding one mile and is quite fertile. At this treaty my father attended with his company as a guard. The character which he had by this time made for himself, called the attention of the government to him, and he was appointed agent of the Cherokees—an office then considered of great importance. He settled on this Island where he continued in the same capacity without intermission until the year 1789—say twelve years. His situation at times was critical, as the Indians were frequently at war, occasioned mostly by the encroachments of the whites, boundary lines being regarded by them no longer than it suited their convenience to transcend them. This brought on frequent conflicts, and placed the agent in a delicate situation. But such was his tact and energy of character, that he sustained himself throughout; often having to go to the nation through great perils.

Once he came in personal contact with the British agent there, and with the influence he ever maintained with the Indians, finally expelled him from the country. Here was an occasion which called forth his superior powers with advantage to the country (for this was the darkest period of the Revolution) and afforded an opportunity for that gallant host that fought and conquered at King's Mountain (and which event gave the first favorable turn to our arms in the Southern States) to leave their homes in safety. For it may be remembered that a great proportion of the force that fought then were frontier men. Thus did he, in the main, retain the confidence of both parties. No other kind of man could have done it. And here from a combination of peculiar circumstances, he was placed in a situation in which he could render, and did render to the country (which required at the time the action of her whole strength) better service than any other in which he could have been placed. The war over, he continued in his situation, by this time surrounded by a dense population. He had become very popular, and though still agent, engaged freely in all the political affairs of the country; was a justice of the peace, and was frequently

elected to the legislature of North Carolina. In the military line, (militia) he was promoted from one grade to another until he was appointed Brigadier-General. He frequently joined campaigns against the Indians, and once commanded a large army against them.

In 1783 he was appointed commissioner with Shelby, late of Kentucky, and Donaldson, father-in-law of General Andrew Jackson, to hold a treaty with the Chickasaw Indians at French Lick—now Nashville.

And I will here remark that those Indians always regarded the provisions of that treaty, and were ever afterwards friendly to the white people.

In 1785 he was appointed commissioner with Pickins and Hawkins to treat with the Cherokees and Choctaws at Hopewell. These appointments go to show the high confidence the government had in him after so many years in its service.

In 1782, my mother, by whom he had seven children, died; and in 1784 he again married a young woman—Susanna Graves—by whom he had eleven children. About the year 1785, he was one of six commissioners appointed by the legislature of Georgia to form a settlement in the bend of the Tennessee river, then a part of Georgia; and to lay out and organize a county, open a land office, sell land warrants, &c. After much preparation in procuring goods with which to quiet the Indians, engaging men, &c., they went on by water next year, and made their stand accordingly. But soon it was discovered impracticable to sustain themselves against the growing hostility of the Indians with whom they were surrounded. They therefore broke up, returned, and reported the result, and for which service they were authorized to enter five thousand acres of land each as indemnity. This, in addition to his Indian agency, made a great part of his time, during many years that he was in the public employment of one kind or another; for such was the versatility of his talents and composition, that he could turn his hand to almost anything.

In 1784, the question about the State of “Franklin” arose, and caused much confusion. The people were much divided—some for, and some against the new State. On this question

my father was in the negative, with his usual decisiveness on all public matters—for he was never indifferent in any matter on which he might be called to act.

In 1788, he was a member of the Convention of North Carolina for the adoption or rejection of the Federal Constitution. This convention rejected it, though my father was in favor of ratification. Another convention met the next year and ratified it, and of this my father was also a member.

He now, this year, resigned his Indian agency, and removed to the old home in Henry county, Virginia, from which he had never removed his family, but visiting them occasionally, after having spent the greater part of the preceding twenty-five years of his life in the western country, and half of that time in public employment.

It is singular that a man of his enterprising spirit, with the advantages he had had in the west, had not located himself to advantage there, rather than return to the country from which he had been so long absent, and towards which he was almost a stranger. But he knew how to make himself known to advantage anywhere. For he was pretty much like the Apostle Paul in one particular, viz: he soon became "all things to all men." Nor have I ever seen any man who possessed this talent in so high a degree as he did. And it never seemed to cost him any labored effort.

To most of the incidents referred to in this narrative, from the time of my father's settling in Powell's Valley, the second time, viz: 1775, I was myself cognizant—having been much with him in the west. But when he returned to Virginia we parted. The particulars of his after life I have received from others mostly.

Soon after his return to his old home in Henry county, Virginia, he was elected to the legislature of that State, and was continued in that service until he himself thought he was by age unfit for usefulness, and declined. Here he acquired a high standing for foresight, integrity and firmness of purpose. And that although, as before said, he could neither speak or write, he nevertheless had a powerful mind; and seemed to arrive at his conclusions by instinct; and such was his weight in the house that he had much in his power to control the proceedings, and

was Mr. Madison's right arm on the famous Virginia resolutions of 1798-1799. It is remarkable that among the thousands of persons whom, by his fine, manly, engaging appearance—his easy address and courteous manners, together with his great public services, he attached to his person, he was never known to loose a friend.

Perhaps his greatest natural talent was military, but he never moved on a theatre to cultivate it. The most of his services in war were partizan commands of militia against Indians, where more depends on personal courage than skill in commanding. He served as Brigadier-General many years in Virginia, with as much reputation as any one could with militia in times of peace. He was always fond of office, but never seemed to aspire beyond or higher than his acknowledged merits. And this I have thought was one and an important reason of his great popularity wherever he lived. He might at any time for many years, have been elected to congress; but he seemed to think that that was a higher office than he could fill with honor to himself or advantage to the country.

After retiring from public business he devoted himself to his domestic concerns, and becoming quite corpulent, in the autumn of 1808 was stricken with paralysis, and shortly after expired in the 68th year of his age, and was interred with the pomp of masonic and military honors at his home on Leatherwood, Henry county, Virginia, leaving a wife in the vigor of life and several minor children. His death was deeply lamented by a numerous offspring and a large—very large circle of friends. He was remarkably kind in his family and for benevolence proverbial.

I have thus drawn out in the best way I am capable the leading traits of the character of my venerable father, in which I have necessarily had to refer incidentally to several circumstances and transactions unconnected with biographical notice. But you will know how to select the material matter from the mass.

WM. MARTIN.